



Teaching to Make a Difference: Advice to New Teachers from Teachers Who've Been There

[Editors and editorial associates of *Rethinking Schools Online*](#)

These words of wisdom from the editors and editorial associates of Rethinking Schools grew out of a discussion about an upcoming book project during our national meeting this July. We asked the editors to share their advice to someone who is new to the profession. The comments are not meant to be comprehensive, but they offer a glimpse into the collective experience of Rethinking Schools - and may provide inspiration to teachers who are drawn to this profession because they believe they can make a difference in the world.

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BILL BIGELOW:

"Your first years are a rehearsal for the rest of your career."

I'd advise new teachers to start teaching before you actually get a job. Begin putting your curriculum together. Decide what subjects or grade levels you'll most likely be teaching - even if you haven't yet been hired - and begin to prepare. With every article you read, think about how to turn it into a lesson - how to bring a particular concept to life for students. Meet with more experienced teachers, raid their files, and build your own before you get a job.

Once you get a job, remember that your first years are a rehearsal for the rest of your career. Develop good curricular habits; be cautious but don't automatically shy away from controversy. Don't be a technician. Create your own curriculum. I think a lot of people, when they begin teaching, start following or trying to find other people's curriculum. Be a creator, not just an instruction-follower. This is not to say that you can't use other people's lessons - there's a lot of good material out there - but see yourself as a producer of curriculum, not just a consumer.

And don't be a Lone Ranger. Teaching can be isolating if you let it. Establish a support group, a study group, a critical friends group, an action group - whatever you want to call it. Just because you may be in a classroom all alone with your students doesn't mean that you should reproduce that isolation outside the classroom. And don't look for support only from people locally. Subscribe to *Rethinking Schools*, the Rethinking Schools listserv, get the Teaching for Change catalogue (www.teachingforchange.org) and buy everything you can afford. Join the National Coalition of Education Activists (NCEA). Go to conferences. It's important to feel part of a broader critical teaching

community and part of a broader movement for social justice.

If you have time, observe master teachers, take notes on everything they say and do and figure out what you can emulate. Make the school your home. Put down roots in the school community - go to students' games or performances; sit next to your kids' parents. Learn all you can about the community your school serves. Call parents, make them your allies. Especially call them to praise their kids and to learn more about them, which a lot of times does not happen at all.

And finally, keep a journal. Figure out a way to distance yourself from the pain. That first year can really be tough so find a way to pull back from that, to be able to think critically about it and to not be swallowed by emotion. But you'll also have successes. Don't assume you'll remember what worked and why. Write it down. And save exemplary student work. You'll want it in future years as prompts to use with students.

Bill Bigelow has taught high school social studies in Portland, Oregon since 1978. In addition to his work as an editor with Rethinking Schools, he is senior consultant for publications for the Network of Educators on the Americas based in Washington, DC. In 2000, he received the Oregon Education Association's Excellence in Education Award.

STEPHANIE WALTERS:

"Beginning teachers have to be forgiving of themselves."

It's amazing to me how much of that first year came back to me and how painful it was. It was a very hard year. And I sit here six years removed, wondering how I got through it. I knew that I had to take care of myself first, and that's what I would tell any first-year teacher. You have to put yourself first because no one else will. You have to, otherwise you will vaporize, you will melt down. I think that once it was okay to say, "I'm not going to do that, it's time for me to go home; that has to be put aside," I felt like I would do more and I did do more. I felt more productive in my classroom and with my planning.

I think that it is important to lean on other people and other curricula. I was in no position to create. It was all I could do to get up in the morning some days. There were times when I felt like I could tackle something and try something of my own creation, but I think that beginning teachers have to be forgiving of themselves. I was so hard on myself and it was almost too late until I figured out a way to say, 'It's okay, I don't know how to do this yet and that's okay I'm going to learn, I'm trying to stick it out for the long haul. If I don't get it this year, I'll get it next year or maybe I'll get it the year after that.' And in my own time I did reach out and got involved.

I think that this is key: Teaching is a craft. You're going to get better at it. I'll use a sports analogy. In baseball, you don't come up from the minors knowing what to do unless you're exceptional. Sometimes you get sent back down and that's tough on egos. I still want to play at the major league level, but I'm still learning.

Stephanie Walters has been an education activist in Milwaukee for 10 years. She has taught first, second, third, and fifth grades in the Milwaukee Public Schools. She has been active in her NEA local as a building representative, board member, and currently as a staff member for the Milwaukee Teachers' Education Association.

LINDA CHRISTENSEN:

"Teach the kind of skills they will need to overcome injustice themselves."

If you're not making mistakes, it means you're not taking risks.

Set clear, high expectations for all students. Don't feel sorry for kids. They don't need your pity; they need you to give them tools and knowledge to navigate the education system. Don't excuse them from homework or higher level skills or more challenging work. If these students are ever going to catch up, they need clear and consistent high expectations.

Wherever you are, fight for equity and justice, whatever that means at your school. For me, that meant trying to end tracking, opening the canon - and also smaller things like keeping the computer lab open after school. If there's a marginalized group, find a way to create a safe place for them and be their advocate in faculty as well as district and state level meetings. Establish safe places for students. Volunteer to advise gay, lesbian, and straight clubs; support student culture groups.

And no matter what materials you're given, find a way to create social-justice units out of them. For example, if you're given *To Kill a Mockingbird*, take Charles M. Payne's book *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Struggle* and talk about the historical background necessary for understanding the context of the book. Unravel the idea of the white man saving the Black man in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Use materials that highlight marginalized groups. Teach students the tools for organizing so that when you're teaching units, you're teaching them the kinds of skills they will need to overcome injustice themselves.

Teaching is full of successes and failures. Ultimately, although I spent sleepless nights worrying about my mistakes, I learned far more from my failures. You are going to fail throughout your teaching career. If you're not making mistakes, it means that you're not taking risks - you're not attempting new curriculum, new strategies. When you fail you have to reflect on what happened and learn from it.

Locate the cultures, the history of the community around your school. Who are the local heroes? What groups are working for justice in your school's neighborhood? Who are your allies? Who can your students research? The media puts forward athletes and movie stars as contemporary heroes. Where can they find alternative models in your community?

Finally, my mom had a saying: Many hands make light work. A teacher I worked with told me, "One night at about 7 o'clock I was still working on a curriculum unit for *Sarah, Plain and Tall*, and I realized that all over the city other teachers were probably also developing lessons for the same book. It just didn't make sense." And it doesn't. Establish a community of people who develop curriculum together. The work not only goes faster, but it's usually better because you have someone to talk through your ideas.

Linda Christensen is High School Language Arts Coordinator for Portland Public Schools. She taught Language Arts at Jefferson High School in Portland for 23 years. She is currently the director of the Portland Writing Project and is the author of Reading, Writing, and Rising Up: Teaching About Social Justice and the Power of the Written Word. She was named Western States Teacher of the Year from U.S. West Foundation.

KATHY SWOPE:

"Equity and justice must come to life within your classroom."

I loved being a teacher. Being a teacher is not an occupation that exists within you only

when you are on location. Being a teacher permeates every fiber of your being all of the time. It is something that never leaves you.

Equity and justice must come to life in your classroom. It is in your classroom that students will experience the world, a world that opens possibilities for their developing hearts and minds.

How do you make this happen?

Courage - Always do what is in the best interest of your students. You are preparing them for a future that we can only imagine. Don't shortchange them because of external pressures.

Continuous learning- We are living in an era of rapid changes. Knowledge is constantly evolving. Model lifelong learning for your students along with the notion of generating new knowledge.

Collaboration - You are not alone. Stay connected to groups and individuals that energize you. You do not have to go solo; there are many others who will support and assist you. Identify available resources and utilize them.

Community- Get to know the community in which you work: the students, your school, and the broader community. Quality education does not happen in isolation. Building upon community strengths provides a solid foundation.

Excellence is a journey. As you embark on this phenomenal voyage, cultivate the joy of learning, a sense of justice, and a commitment to the global community through the pursuit of equity and excellence.

Kathy Swope has more than 20 years of classroom experience. She worked for several years in the Division of Research and Assessment, and she currently serves as an administrator with the Department of Technology for the Milwaukee Public Schools. She has facilitated professional development opportunities for teachers and principals in the areas of classroom assessment, multicultural education, and the integration of technology. She is also a member of the Metropolitan Milwaukee Alliance of Black School Educators. She is co-editor of Failing Our Kids: Why the Testing Craze Won't Fix Our Schools.

KELLEY DAWSON:

"You're making thousands of political decisions every day."

I've been looking at education as a system that is racist and classist and that sometimes hurts children and families. As a teacher you are part of the system and you have to figure out a way not to participate in the hurtful aspects of that system. You are there to work for kids and families.

There were some basic things during my first year that nobody went over, in terms of "Here's what they're going to ask you to do, this is what is unfair or unjust about it, this is how it hurts kids, and this is how you could resist doing it." I was totally alone. I didn't know how to respond to the things I was being asked to do - regular things like how to deal with standardized tests or whether I should follow specific testprep curriculum that I was being asked to use. I got the message that I was supposed to follow along and not question whether those kinds of things really work for kids.

I think teachers can be agents of change and we shouldn't accept the idea that we don't have the power to do anything in the situation. Even if you don't see yourself as a political person or someone with control over what you're doing, in reality, you're making thousands of political decisions everyday. Not intervening when a student makes a racist comment is a political decision. Teaching from textbooks that emphasize only the European-American experience is another one. Those are political decisions that hurt students. You can also make choices that help students - choose to intervene when you hear a homophobic slur, choose to find books that represent the experiences of many different kinds of people, etc.

I think the thing about support is huge. Support comes from a lot of different places and you need humor and people that will help care for you and listen to you. You also need good professional relationships with all of your colleagues and to appreciate that different people can offer different things. Not everyone has to be in agreement with you on teaching philosophy or politics or the kind of curriculum you're doing, but you can still collaborate with them, even though there are major differences. You also need a core of people that share your philosophy and politics that you can learn from and emulate.

Kelley Dawson teaches fourth grade Spanish at La Escuela Fratney, a twoway bilingual school in the Milwaukee Public Schools. She is in her fourth year of teaching. She organizes for better schools through her work with the Coalition for Responsible Assessment and the Milwaukee Teachers' Education Association. She is an advocate for immigrant students and families, a member of the Coalition for a Just and General Amnesty, and a volunteer with Voces de la Frontera, a workers' center in Milwaukee.

STAN KARP:

"It's a system that doesn't work as it should, and all of us have a hand in trying to set it right."

I think new teachers need a combination of the practical and the visionary. For survival purposes it's important to find people to share your experiences and struggles with as you go through them. It's also important to find someone who can orient you to your school's strengths, weaknesses, and possibilities. Another key is avoiding what I call the "epidemic of negativity" that afflicts too many schools and teachers; sometimes that means avoiding the faculty lounge and finding another place to eat lunch.

It is useful for new teachers to reflect on the difference between being a "good person" and being a "good teacher." It is important to be nurturing and supportive of your students, but it's also important to challenge them to work hard and to help them assume responsibility for making their own schooling successful. Young teachers can often establish a special bond with kids. But in a complex institutional setting like a school the reactions you get from students, colleagues, and parents stem from a variety of factors and experiences. If you're able to maintain a little critical distance to reflect on situations and not internalize or personalize everything, it will help smooth out the emotional ups and downs, which can get pretty intense.

It's also important to hold fast to the hopes and dreams that most people bring with them to teaching: a desire to help young people, a passion for learning, a sense of hope and optimism for the future, and a belief in the capacity of people to grow and work together. These are all essential for success in the classroom. Good teachers develop over time as they create successful curriculum and learn their craft. But your core values remain a guide to keep you on course and they'll make themselves felt in endless ways in your classroom.

Finally, it's helpful for new teachers to understand that as social institutions, schools have a very contradictory character. On the one hand, they are probably the last place where an increasingly diverse and divided population still comes together for a common purpose. They remain places where people can struggle to improve the conditions of their lives, to increase their access to wealth, power, and opportunity. On the other hand, schools are state institutions that reproduce the class, race, and gender inequalities of the larger society in a host of obvious and not so obvious ways. It's a system that doesn't work as it should, and all of us have a hand in trying to set it right.

Stan Karp has been a public high school teacher in Paterson, N.J. for 25 years. He has taught English and journalism, and for 15 years was publications advisor to The Torch, an award-winning student newspaper. He is currently the lead teacher for the Communications Academy at JFK High School. He is a former co-chair of the National Coalition of Education Activists, and he is a co-editor of Funding for Justice: Money, Equity and the Future of Public Education and of Rethinking Our Classrooms: Teaching for Equity and Justice.

DAVID LEVINE:

"Here's something to wrestle with forever."

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I think it's important that new teachers think of themselves as scholars, in the best sense of the word. Theory, when it's good, is practical and scholarship has to do with the capacity to think and write clearly within an arena larger than your own classroom - in dialogue, in a community with other teachers, with the broader community. It's important that you find and use literature and people who have looked at these problems systematically and that together you weigh evidence.

We need to realize that values are always embedded in people's assessment of schools, even when they adopt the pretense of objectivity, and you have to understand other people's values.

And use this material that you encounter beyond your own classroom. And then as scholars, I think, what it is important to do is to really say to people: here's a set of questions that involve a set of choices that you have as a professional. Along with that we can give ideological takes on things, but more to the point, here's something to wrestle with forever, or as long as you're a teacher - something like ability grouping. You're going to have to constantly be sorting out what that means practically.

We need to have teachers see themselves within the flow of history - in the intersection of the past and the future. And we can aspire to a historical understanding of schooling. Schools are constantly an engine of social reproduction and places where there are many democratic aspirations and democratic experiments. But schools also exist as an index of society and its health. You could look at the state of schools and [measure the] health in our society.

David Levine taught high school in Milwaukee for several years, where he was active in community efforts to make the public schools more democratic and equitable. In 1999, he received a doctorate in Educational Policy Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He is currently an assistant professor in the School of Education at the University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill, where he teaches courses on American educational history and the politics of educational reform and researches the role of

radical pedagogy in the Civil Rights Movement.

BOB PETERSON:

"We need to teach for global justice."

Here are some of the things I tell prospective teachers:

The first thing I say is to really educate yourself. I tell all of my student teachers if they want to be a student teacher in my classroom, they need to read Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*. Sometimes I also suggest Ronald Takaki's *A Different Mirror*. Teachers should read these books because they need to ground themselves in the history and worldview of those who have been left out of history. This need doesn't just apply to history, it applies to literature, to geography, science, current events, and language.

The second thing I tell people is that they need to search out some colleagues to be mentors and compatriots. It's hard to survive alone. Start a book club, join a union committee or oppositional caucus, start a Rethinking Schools study circle, or join the National Coalition of Education Activists. Part of the reason I've survived teaching all these years is because of the support and intellectual stimulation I've gotten through my involvement with Rethinking Schools.

You also have to make an assessment of whether or not you can survive at the school you've landed in. Is there a fundamental mismatch with your values in terms of pedagogical approach? Because, obviously, values are embedded in the pedagogical approach and how a school deals with curriculum content. And then you have to make an assessment: Is there a match? And if not can you struggle to change things within your school? Are there enough allies to do that? Or do you have to find a new school? And maybe you can find a new setting and move in and be comfortable because it's already established, or you can do what some of us did and create a whole new public school like when we started Fratney. (See interview with Rita Tenorio on page 12.) By the way, I would not underestimate how hard it is to create your own school.

Another thing I say to teachers, especially in the first or second year when you're thinking, "Do I really want to be a teacher?" is to be proud that you're entering one of the most challenging professions that exists. Scientists can land a spaceship on the moon, but they've yet to understand the nature of intellectual, social, emotional, physical development of children into adults. Despite the fact that we teachers are marginalized and not respected, we are teaching the future generation and that's one of the most challenging and rewarding occupations.

The struggle for quality education has been a centerpiece of freedom struggles throughout the United States, particularly for people of color. I think we have to understand that we have a special role to help continue that struggle.

We also have to have a global perspective. We work in the biggest superpower on the planet - some call it the "belly of the monster." Given increased global inequality, global warming and poverty, the devastation of mother earth, and the fact that the "ecological footprint" of the people in this country is larger than anywhere else, we have responsibilities to address that. We need to teach for global justice. And if we don't, who will?

We also need to be recognize that all teaching is political, whether we're conscious of it or not. We all make political decisions every day in the classroom. If we decide to put up

a Halloween bulletin board instead of a bulletin board that indicts Christopher Columbus for being a war criminal, that's a political decision. If we decide to make Valentine's Day hearts with kids instead of celebrating Black History Month, that's a political decision. And it's okay to do some of those things - I'm not against Halloween or hearts, although I oppose a holiday-driven curriculum - but we should do things self-consciously and recognize the political nature of our work.

And one last thing. In the midst of the pressures and hectic pace, I encourage people to enjoy their students and marvel at how they grow in understanding life on this small blue dot that we live on.

Bob Peterson teaches fifth grade at La Escuela Fratney, a two-way bilingual public school in Milwaukee, Wis. He is a founding editor of Rethinking Schools. He co-edited (with Bill Bigelow) Rethinking Globalization: Teaching for Justice in an Unjust World and Rethinking Columbus: The Next 500 Years and (with Michael Charney) Transforming Teacher Unions: Fighting for Better Schools and Social Justice. In 1995 he was named Wisconsin's Elementary Teacher of the Year.

DALE WEISS:

"Stay true to your authentic self."

For much of the time I was in my teacher certification program I was adamant about textbooks being the enemy of progressive education. All I could think about were the static kinds of delivery they seemed to offer and the misinformation many presented. But there's only so much you can do or expect yourself be able to do during your first years of teaching. In content areas where I felt the strongest, I tried out many different ideas and did my best to be creative. But in areas where I felt a lot more challenged, I stuck real close to those textbooks. This helped me gain a better grip on the curriculum as well as understand how students grasp ideas and learn. Then, I was better able to slowly move away from the textbooks and create more of my own curriculum.

Much of my first year of teaching was spent trying to bring together the world of my political activism and passion for equity and justice, with the new world I was entering as a teacher. I know I made lots of mistakes and learned some things the hard way. But I learned a lot of valuable lessons as well.

During your first year of teaching, focus your energies and values within your classroom. Observe all that goes on outside of your classroom but don't try to influence it in overt ways. Take lots of time to listen to your colleagues - both their verbal and nonverbal messages will tell you a lot. Listening is a great teacher.

Be sure to communicate with parents and your administrator regularly regarding what you are teaching and why. This will always keep you one step ahead. Build relationships with your colleagues. Find common ground that you can build upon. Don't assume that agreement on one issue means agreement on all issues.

Start small. If there is one teacher with whom you experience pedagogical rapport, consider yourself lucky. Do collaborative projects with each other. Eventually two of you working together will lead to three will lead to four. You will then begin to have a critical mass from which to try out new things.

Forgive yourself for making mistakes: Your first year of teaching will undoubtedly be full of them. Don't be harsher on yourself than you would be on your most trying student.

Never forget that your passion for your students and your passion for justice are both worthy endeavors. Do not believe you need to forsake one for other. Stay true to your authentic self.

Dale Weiss currently works as a dual-language grant coordinator at La Escuela Fratney in Milwaukee, WI. She previously was a Program Implementer in several middle schools and has taught children of preschool age through fourth grade. She recently completed her doctorate in education; the focus of her dissertation was the experience of Jewish feminist women working for social justice.

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